

Whose Liturgy Is It?

NORMAN NAGEL



LITURGY. Λειτουργία. Ἡ θεία καὶ ἱερὰ λειτουργία. “THE divine and holy liturgy.” That’s how those who have been doing it the longest talk about it, as found, for instance, in the Byzantine liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. And even today, if you pass by an Orthodox church and look at the notice board, it will tell you when the “Divine Liturgy” is next going on.

We face the question tonight as to *why* the liturgy goes on, *who’s* doing it, and *whose* liturgy it is? Clearly in the Greek tradition, which is the oldest, it’s *God’s* show. So λειτουργία went into Latin most easily as *munus*, which had its equivalent in *officium*, which went into German as *Amt*. Thus, in Germany, the Roman Catholic notice board will tell you when *Das Hochamt* is next going to be celebrated (that’s the Mass; almost next to a doctrine of the ministry, isn’t it?).

Into French and English went the other Latin word which ran with *officium*—*servitium*, *servitium Dei*. Thus, in French and English today there is much reference to “service” (e.g., *Service Book and Hymnal*). What dropped off, however, was the *Dei* part that ran with the *servitium* when it was still running in the way of ἡ θεία καὶ ἱερὰ λειτουργία—“the divine and holy liturgy.”

At first, you couldn’t have a *servitium* without a *Deus*, and so it was *servitium Dei*. Later, however, the genitive was dropped, and so it developed into the world in which Luther grew up, which spoke mostly of *servitium* or *munus* or *officium*, but all apart from the genitive *Dei*. Thus, one of the great liturgical achievements of the Reformation was that the genitive came back! Whose service is it? *God’s* service! *Gottesdienst!* From the Reformation on, and within that heritage and tradition, it has been called *Gottesdienst*. But if not that, then what?

GOTTESDIENST

Dienst, of course, goes into English as “service.” And when in the Lutheran tradition the genitive *Gottes* got dropped off,

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space was made for the supposition that perhaps it really wasn’t God’s *Dienst* but ours. And so in the English-speaking world, *Dienst* came to be translated in that line of thinking as “worship.” Thus, to say “worship service” is utter tautology; it is to say the same thing by the Latin line as well as the Anglo-Saxon line—somewhat like saying you have a “belly stomach-ache.” And anyway, as Reginald Fuller once pointed out in the Lutheran-Episcopal dialogue, “worship” is a term that is not really at home in the Lutheran tradition (or perhaps shouldn’t be). We once had a “Commission on Liturgy and Hymnody.” Now we have a “Commission on *Worship*.” Of course, the word “liturgy” also took a long time to come into our usage, way into the seventeenth century. But *Gottesdienst* has always been there.

What is *Gottesdienst*? Is it a subjective or objective genitive? Is God the subject doing it or is he the object of what is being done? Is he at the receiving end of the verbs or are we?

Λειτουργία (as you read your Kittel [4:215 ff.]) is the service that a benefactor renders by putting up the money for the next sports event or a ship for the city’s navy. Kalb calls that kind of a *Dienst* a *Volksdienst*. You can’t get much mileage out of that kind of a *Dienst*, but there are, of course, people who do.

Never trust anybody who runs it all by etymology. There you will hear that in λειτουργία, there’s ἔργον stuff and there’s λαός stuff, so λειτουργία must mean “work of the people.” Utter nonsense, but it certainly fits for those who would be pushing their understanding of the liturgy as a “work of the people.” It runs well with the “people of God” notion of the liturgy that has come out of the Roman Catholic endeavor to get the Mass out of the hands of the priest and into the action of the people along with him. That’s where the movement from mouth communion to hand communion comes in. By putting their hands out, everybody can be getting into the action since it’s supposed to be the “work of the people.”

You won’t get it simply by etymology. You need to ask: what is it that is called by that name? What is the *content* of the term in its usage, and within that usage, what is it exactly that is going on? And what was going on there even before there was a term for it? As Elert pointed out, baptism was going on long before there was a doctrine about it. It’s rather like that with the liturgy.

In the Old Testament, there was no doubt about whose liturgy it was; *God* gave it to them. As they lived in that liturgy, they were then his people. When it came to the temple, all of the sacrifices and the services there were given them to do by God, and when there wasn't any temple left during the captivity and after A.D. 70, the big hole left vacant was filled in with liturgy, where confessing the *Shema* was recognized as being a sacrifice. We pick that up in the New Testament with the synagogue service. You recall how in Jerusalem the first Christians continued to go along and do all of the temple liturgy things. This is the kind of continuity which runs in the way of the gospel, not in the way of the law which says, "Don't got to do that no more."

You may recall that when the apostle Paul came to a place, he started off at the synagogue. In Luke 4 our Lord did the same thing. He didn't say: "What would be a nice text to push what I want to push today?" He preached on the appointed pericope, "as was his custom" [Lk 4:16]. Guilding [A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship*, Oxford, 1960] has attempted to show how the whole of the Gospel of John runs according to a lectionary which finds its rhythm in the festivals of the year. Jesus himself lived and preached within all that.

In the synagogue you had the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." With that, they confessed, rejoiced, and acknowledged, "It's all the Lord's show. His name first." All of that came by way of the words which had gone into their ear holes. After the *Shema* came prayers pulled out of the name of God. Then a reading from the Torah, a reading from the prophets, and then a sermon and a blessing. That was the pattern of Luke 4 and the apostle in the synagogue. Our Lord's sermon, "Today is this fulfilled," became the proclamation of the apostle, and along with that proclamation, the reading of the apostolic words when you didn't have an apostle there preaching anymore.

With Jesus and the message that he fulfilled—the whole of the Scriptures—comes all that he brings with him and bestows. He promises that where two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is in the midst of them [Mt 18:20]. This fulfills the saying in the *Mishna*: "Wherever two or three men are reading the Torah, there is the *Shekinah* among them." Jesus uses that saying in reference to his own name. It's out from his name, then, that the name of the triune God was first put upon us at our baptism, for with Jesus come the mandates and gifts of holy baptism, holy communion, holy absolution, and holy ministry (2 Cor 8:23). When you call them "holy," you're saying, "They are the *Lord's*. *His* show. *He* runs them."

All of that flows into our confession of *Gottesdienst*. It is the Lord who is there for us where his name is, and with his words he delivers what his gifts say. We are there only as those who are being given to. Ours is simply the way of faith, and faith has nothing to say except what it is given to say: "Amen."

In 1 Corinthians, and also in Justin Martyr's first *Apology*, you are struck with what a big deal the "Amen" is. You remember the apostle says, "That's something no one can say 'Amen' to" [1 Cor. 14:16]. He's talking about what's going on in the liturgy. In Justin Martyr also you see the people say "Amen"—"So be it! That's it! Gift received!" When you're saying back to

God what he has said to you—ὁμολογεῖν—you can't be getting it wrong, nor is it something that can be wobbled or changed.

We are working toward the question of *adiaphora*. Everything that has been said so far cannot be tossed or cannot be put under the heading *adiaphora*. It is simply there. Given. That's how the Lord does it. It's an enormous lot of liturgy, and it's liturgy understood in the way of faith and in the way of the means of grace.

LITURGY AS THE LORD'S WORDS

When we talked about the word *liturgy* and said, "Now what is it that is called by that name?" it was all of those things. In the Large Catechism's explanation of the First Commandment [LC 1, 16, 27] *Gottesdienst* is everything that is with us at the receiving end of God's gifts, enlivened by those gifts to the praise and thanks to God—that dimension of liturgy which is the "bounce back to God" of his gifts. God says: "I am the Lord your God." We say: "You are the Lord our God." He says: "You are my people." We say: "We are your people." And so also comes the "Amen." God says: "Your sins are forgiven." Faith says: "Amen." God says: "Peace be with you." Faith says: "Amen."

Beginning early in the third century, there was a fair bit of liturgy that was written down. All we have from before then are basically agendas. They didn't have service books. They knew it all by heart! In Justin Martyr's *Apology* (you may recall that it was addressed to the emperor who was thinking that it might be a good thing to get rid of the Christians), Justin Martyr is wanting to show that Christians aren't really such dangerous people, and that perhaps they might even be *good* for the empire. And so you get summary statements [*Apology* 1:61-67] which describe what goes on with the newly baptized, and then

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what goes on every Sunday. This is about A.D. 150. Here's the first time that we ever find it said that Sunday is the day on which creation began and the day on which our Lord arose. Prior to that we hadn't heard that. That's some 120 years after Jesus. What went on in between? Well, all of the things we had spoken of above with the *Shema*.

In Justin's account of Christian worship, you have the things we have seen going on in the synagogue as well as all the things that came in with Jesus—Κύριος Ἰησοῦς and all of that [Phil 2:11; Rom 10:9]. God was giving his gifts, and faith was joyfully receiving and acclaiming them. In 1 Corinthians 14, it got to be a bit too much, and so the apostle said, "Let everything be done decently and in order" [1 Cor 14:40]. Some peo-

ple like to use that as the *sedes doctrinae* for liturgy. Actually, it was just that there was so much going on that it was more of a “Let’s do it not all talking at the same time.” Corinth was a rather spectacular case. You recall how the apostle calls them back to the liturgy, as he quotes it with the words of our Lord [1 Cor 11:23-26]. From the liturgy, then, he draws out the things that they need to be hearing about.

Cullmann is the man who finds a bit of liturgy behind every bush in the New Testament [O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, SCM, 1953]. Test that out. And there’s the glorious Κύριος Ἰησοῦς essay of Sasse [H. Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, Concordia, 1984, pp. 9-35]. He thought that was the best thing he’d ever written. He couldn’t say anything more to the heart of it all.

You don’t fling yourself about in such a way as to draw attention to yourself. Anything that draws attention to you is running counter to Gottesdienst.

With the Lord’s Supper, the words are there. With Holy Baptism, the words are there. With the readings, the words are there. Simply given to us! You look at the early liturgies and they are 98% (or 97.3%!) Holy Scripture. Clearly, the Lord is having his say, and with his words he’s giving out his gifts. So there’s what happens, and then there are the words that are used (and these are maximally the Lord’s own words from Holy Scripture), and then there are what you might call the “rubrics.” Something like them are mentioned in Hebrews 9:1, where you have the “rules” or “regulations” of the “liturgy” or “service” [δικαιώματα λατρείας]. So if you look at the early liturgies (or the Byzantine liturgy which I quoted above), you find that the words of the liturgy that are spoken are 98% Scripture, and then in between you get “rubrics.”

RUBRICS

In contemporary usage, the freight of the term *liturgy* has tended to shrink from what is described as *Gottesdienst* in the Large Catechism, to merely a text in a book, or even simply the rubrics for doing it. Now, of course, the one who is the instrumentality of the Lord’s saying his words certainly needs some help in doing that maximally as the instrumentality of the Lord, and so there are rubrics. But anything that deflects away from the Lord toward his instrument runs counter to what the liturgy’s there for, that is, *Gottesdienst*.

That’s why it’s a good thing to cover him up with vestments so that you can forget whether it’s Chuck, John, Bill, or Fred. And he shouldn’t be wearing argyle socks and fancy shoes. And keep your feet on the floor . . . both of them. You don’t lounge about or draw attention to yourself in any way. That reminds me of when I visited in a resident hostel for young ladies in New York. The rule of the house was that in the rooms where they could receive their gentlemen callers, both

feet had always to be on the ground, which was a nice way of saying, “No hanky-panky.”

Similarly in the chancel. You don’t fling yourself about in such a way as to draw attention to yourself. Anything that draws attention to you is running counter to *Gottesdienst*. You are a kind of “necessary instrumentality.” The Lord, astonishingly, has you there to speak his words, but *how* you are there is to be a confession of that fact. And so, if somebody comes into chapel and looks at you, he is to be drawn by you into the direction you are pointed. And so you don’t gawk all around to see how many people are coming in or not. You are there to aid people toward what you are *all* there for. This is the *coram Deo* point, and you are there as nothing but a servant. Anything that trumpets the fact that it’s Uncle Fritz up there runs contrary to being a servant.

Now, of course, for fancy shoes and keeping feet on the floor, we don’t have a word of God. We do have rubrics, and you’re going to be turning at the altar one way or another, and so you learn how to do it in a way that is most serviceable to the gospel. And since it is the Lord’s way of giving, we are taught in the way of faith which is contradicted by an “I don’t got to.” The liturgy was there before you were. That’s the marvelous thing! Sometime you must go to an Orthodox church. Nothing could be more irrelevant, and they’re doing it just like they’ve been doing it for 1500 years!

SAME OLD LITURGY

We are now in the year of celebrating a thousand years of the Christian Church in Russia. They would be much more apt to talk about it as a thousand years of the liturgy. As the liturgy’s going on, the Lord is having himself his people as he gives out his gifts and is praised. I think, perhaps later in our question-and-answer session, we might bump into some of the ways nowadays that people would take over the liturgy, as if it belonged to them to do with as they please. There are those who say, “Well, as long as you’ve followed the parts more or less, you can put in something that you’ve made up yourself.” One brother here told me that he was expected to be involved in what was called a “Christmas Creed.” And he asked the pastor where it came from, and the pastor said, “Oh, I wrote it. Isn’t it nice?” Where it says “Creed” you have Creed—Creed as given to us, not as we whipped together in a cutesy way last night or three months ago.

Similarly you don’t play games with the name of God. You say it like he gave it to us to say, like it was put on you at your baptism. And when you quote Scripture in the liturgy, you quote Scripture as the Lord gave it to us. You don’t think that you might be able to improve on it. It’s only as you are sure of the name of God that there’s any liturgy at all. And who are you to be calling on the name of the Lord except that he’s put his name on you at your baptism? That, you recall, is in Peter’s sermon [Acts 2] and also in Romans 10: “All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” That’s liturgy!

The history of the liturgy is like a great tree. Some of the branches have been blown away or pruned off. A little bit more has grown here or there. But what we know of the liturgy, from as long as we know of the liturgy, is what’s gone on in the litur-

gy. With that we confess a whole lot of things. We confess the *perpetuo mansura* of Augustana VII. It's the Lord's church, which he sees through to the end, and we know ourselves to be in the company of those who through the centuries called upon the name of the Lord. With them we are gathered in his name, are given the forgiveness of sins. With his word he delivers what his words say—baptism, Holy Communion. And so the liturgy is one of the greatest treasures! It is where we live as his people, for we are his people only as we are gathered in his name.

Thus, the liturgy can be a great gift, haven, and joy to people who live in a society and a world where they can't be quite sure what things are going to be like five years from now, or whether tomorrow everything will be changed. In a world where everything has gotten to be so transitory and "throw it away tomorrow," is there anything that they can count on as lasting, that they can be sure will still be there tomorrow, next Sunday, next year, and when they die? The liturgy delivers the answer, "Yes!" Same old liturgy every Sunday. You can count on it like it's been there for a thousand years and more. When people bump into that in a world where there isn't anything else they can be sure of like that, *there* is something real! And so we decline the demands of a consumer society which has to have a new model every year or every week if you're going to sell. For then you're talking marketing, and you're not talking the church of Christ and the holy liturgy.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dr. Nagel, you've been talking about "the" liturgy as if it's all the same. But haven't we received many liturgies or many styles of liturgy down through the history of the church? If so, how do we decide which form of liturgy to follow? Or are you speaking just of broad outlines? Even our own hymnal has quite a variety of liturgies.

The front runner in all that I've been saying is *Hauptgottesdienst*, and that's the Sunday morning service. That's the way Justin Martyr tells us and Hippolytus and Pliny's letter and all that's given in the New Testament about it. In Anglican usage, "the services" are all of the others beside Holy Communion. There's Holy Communion, and then there are "the services."

Now when you say "What a lot," do you mean six or five hundred? To run Sunday morning in a novel way—like it's never been done before—is a most unfaithful thing. Whether we have two or three settings of the same liturgy, that's not at the heart of the matter. For instance, in *Lutheran Worship*, one of the things that we sought to achieve there with the different settings was that there would be more than one way of doing things, but that these would become *familiar* ways of doing them. Some people, when they show up for church on Sunday morning, don't have much of a clue as to what to expect. "What's he going to try out on us today?" That's the extreme, of course. When you point to the number of settings, it's a recognition of the bounty of gifts, and one never can say, "Well, that's the lot of it." The next time there is a new hymnbook, by then you should be having such opportunity for the enrichment of the liturgical life of the church, but that comes through the centuries a bit here and a bit there.

A partner question perhaps to "Whose liturgy is it?" would be "Who is the liturgy for?" Some of the works that I've run into recently talk a lot about how liturgy needs to be made serviceable for the purposes of evangelism. If people walk in who have never been to a Christian service before, they ought to know what's going on. And so we've got to make it as simple and straightforward as possible.

The Orthodox liturgy is so utterly theocentric. People drift in and drift out. In that tradition they all know what's going on, but you or I drifting in wouldn't have much of a clue. Now, what goes on in the liturgy is what goes on in the church. They are interchangeable. Evangelism is reaching out to the unchurched, and you do that in the best way that you can, but you can't do that with Holy Communion. "Shove off Holy Communion for a few Sundays. We're going to do evangelism here because we think that the liturgy is for people." Pretty risky to be shoving the Lord's Supper aside.

Here again, the Lord's service is not a sales pitch. We are gathered merely as the Lord has gathered us. Perhaps the question is better put this way: if the stranger comes wandering in and exclaims, "There's nothing like this anyplace else in the world!" then the message has begun to get through. The more comfortable we make it for them in the ways of the world which they bring with them, the more we impede their evangelization.

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In the church which I served in London, there was *Hauptgottesdienst* in the morning. But if you weren't quite sure whether you were a full-blast Christian, or didn't much know whether you wanted to be or not, you might slip in to the evening service. The evening service was there in such a way as to be a bit more of a "Nicodemus kind of thing," so that you have services which bear that in mind. However, does that mean setting aside the previous set of considerations? And can you ever do evangelism by the thousands? They all end up in the water [Acts 2:41]!

You see, it has been said that Lutheran Hour preaching soft-peddles baptism because we would lose all our Baptist hearers if we gave them a full-blast straight doctrine of Holy Baptism. (I do not say that it is so. I say that I have *heard* it said. Check the evidence.) But the whole Nicodemus thing of "the wind bloweth where it listeth," and you can't call the shots on the Holy Spirit, and anybody that's got a sure-fire evangelizing technique is talking about something that is not in the way of the Holy Spirit as we confess. He does his work where and when it pleases him. That's a recognition that we don't call the shots.

We don't sit down first off and say, "What's the best way

to do it?" The Lord gives us the means of grace and says, "Here's what you get on with." It's only if you think that they won't work that you have to resort to other measures.

One of the things you often hear Luther say is, "We don't have a Word of God about that, but we have been given the gospel, and that's to be the way of it." And yet you may hear the insistence that proper church music is Palestrina, so we'll have nothing but Palestrina here; or proper church music is guitars, and so we'll have nothing but guitars here. One of the greatest temptations for those who love the liturgy is to slip into legalisms. And even though you see how astonishingly conservative Luther was with regard to the liturgy—pretty much the same old thing—he wouldn't say, "That's it! We've got it for good!" There is always what's alive and growing in the liturgy.

One of the greatest temptations for those who love the liturgy is to slip into legalisms.

Now are we to ask, "What do people want?" or "What will best serve the gospel?" There are some kinds of words and music which impede or deflect from the gospel. There are some kinds of music which would work people's emotions toward a programmed end—that draw people into paying attention to themselves rather than Christ-ward and toward his gifts. This is what the apostle is speaking about in 1 Corinthians. Each of those problems arose because people were being deflected from Christ.

It is not as though we have a great heritage and we live on that. Rather, we live in that heritage in the way of those who know that the Lord never quits giving his gifts, and those gifts don't come in contradiction to what he's given already. They come in the way of their enlargement and vitalization.

This "always more" aspect of the liturgy is particularly noticeable in Holy Baptism. There are so many good things to be extolling there! Shouldn't we be putting in the sign of the cross, or the renunciation, or the baptismal garment, or the baptismal candle? . . . so that it grows to such a point that there's so much extolling of all these wonderful gifts of baptism that underneath it all, the real thing may become blurred. And so from time to time some pruning is necessary, but it's always in the way of the gospel. You can't not be extolling the gifts, but then you know, "The meat'll be burning if we don't get home by 12:15!" *Lutheran Worship* puts a few nice things back in again, and next time around people will say, "That takes frightfully much too long. We'll snip that out." So whether you

have a candle or not, we don't have a word of God for it, but how we come to have a candle or not have a candle is no matter of indifference. We may only arrive at it in the way of the gospel and in the service of the gospel.

Concerning ceremony in the service—the sign of the cross, kneeling, censing, and the like—how does one keep these things from calling attention to one's self rather than to the gospel?

When the servants of the liturgy come out into the chancel, they kneel at the prayer desk. With that they are drawing people into what they're to be there for. If they came out and prostrated themselves in front of the altar, that would say something good and true and honoring God, but the rest of us would have forgotten what we were there for and would say "Well, why on earth is he doing that?" or "That's a bit much, isn't it?"

Growth comes by inches. You need to recognize that we are within "the mutual conversation of the brethren" [SA III, IV]. We live within this tradition, and with its treasures we are then equipped for helping one another to recognize what is growing and what is in the way of the gospel. So, when we go into chapel and there are some who recall their baptisms with the sign of the cross as the Small Catechism bids us to, and some don't, and some sit and pray and some kneel and pray—that's something to be rejoicing about!

That's the extraordinary thing about the way the apostle deals with those who are so hip off into tongues. He doesn't stand at the door and frisk the tongues out of them. He sort of lets them go on having tongues in the liturgy. He doesn't knock tongues. He just feeds them more Jesus. The more Jesus goes in, the more the tongues get pushed to the fringe. And he indicates that priority by putting tongues at the bottom of the list [1 Cor 12:10]. He doesn't slice them off, but there is a direction there.

And so, when you come to a congregation whose liturgical life—that is, the way in which they have been given the gifts of our Lord and the means of grace—has been pretty impoverished, you don't come out and say, "Hey, we got to do something about this liturgy!" You first of all preach a few years of Jesus into them, and then they come to know what they're there for and that he always has more to be giving them.

The legalism which I spoke of is our greatest danger. It is indicated when people "come on strong" with doing this or that as a great, big liturgical advance. But the gospel works by way of drawing people into the liturgy so that they say, "Wow, isn't this great! More than I ever suspected!" Real growth comes only by inches.

And so when we go into chapel, and there's a great hub-bub of chatter, I have sometimes felt like arising and saying, "Shut up, you lot! Don't you know what we're here for?" We may serve our brethren better if we are at our prayers, and by them, invite and draw and pull others into the quietness *coram Deo*. That is the appropriate way of being before the Lord and his having his say. LOGIA